Still Wobbly

The Industrial Workers of the World marches on, faithful to the concept of one big union

Newhouse News Service

PHILADELPHIA – The Wobblies, diehard iconoclasts of the labour movement, are still around. Still organizing. Still looking to transform the world order.

Over the last few years, the tiny yet feisty Industrial Workers of the World has seen its membership grow – to 1,000 worldwide, up from a low of fewer than 100 in the early 1960s.

And those members remain true to the concept of "one big union." They're radical syndicalists, as they have been since the IWW's founding in 1905 in Chicago. (Quick labour history review: a syndicalist favours bringing government and industry under control of labour unions by means of "direct action," such as general strikes and, if need be, sabotage.)

They fight to transfer all profits and power from bosses to workers, because it's the workers who do all the work. That victory would form the shell of a new society, they say – as they have said, loudly, for all these years.

Their idealistic battle was ignited generations ago by Wobblies who became legendary: Mother Jones, who agitated for labour rights into her 90s and inspired a magazine that still bears her name. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union. Balladeer Joe Hill, whose last words were, "Don't waste time in mourning. Organize." Eugene Debs, who helped create the Socialist Party in America.

Image of imprisoned worker from early Wobbly poster. Taken from the Wobbly Web site at www.iww.org

BUCKS THE TREND

That the Wobblies still exist, much less are growing, runs against a decades-long decline in mainstream American labour union membership. It hit a high of 27 per cent of the work force in 1953; its current 14 per cent is an all-time low, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics.

The IWW has made inroads recently, organizing bookstores, small shops, college-student workers and temporary employees. It got a smattering of national publicity in 1996 when an employee was fired after trying, unsuccessfully, to organize a Borders Books & Music store in Philadelphia.

The national IWW headquarters shifted this year from Ypsilanti, Mich., to Philadelphia, site of former glory days: back in 1916, all but two of the bustling docks at this port were under IWW control.

And now, the top Wob is a young woman. She is Alexis Buss, a slight, 27-year-old freckled Philadelphian who wears her IWW cap backward. Buss was elected in January, after pledging "to make the IWW a cohesive fighting organization, rather than a collection of isolated activists." To reinvigorate the IWW, once known – and feared – as "the fighting union."

No one remembers exactly why members are called Wobblies, or Wobs for short, as they have been since the early 1900s. Some say it's symbolic of the wobble saw, mounted to cut a groove wider than the saw is thick. Others think it's based on an immigrant's mispronunciation of the letters IWW – "eye wobble-you-wobble-you."

From its founding, the IWW has been one intense bunch:

- They wrote and sang the most enduring labour songs, including Solidarity Forever, Rebel Girl and The Preacher and the Slave, origin of the phrase "pie in the sky."
- They staged dramatic job actions: in 1912, Wobs lead 10,000 strikers at the American Woolen Co. mills in Lawrence, Mass., forcing managers to give workers significant pay raises. Strikers were beaten and a woman worker was killed by shots from the swarms of 22,000 military police.
- They were famous for their propaganda: "Keep warm, burn out the rich." "The boss needs you, you don't need him." "Good pay or bum work."
- They've constantly fought for a seemingly unattainable goal: as the preamble to the IWW constitution reads, "a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system and live in harmony with the Earth."

STILL AROUND

But now, "What I hear all the time is, 'Wobblies? You guys still around?' " Buss says at a recent protest march while hawking buttons with such slogans as "4-Hour Day, 4-Day Week" and "Stop Exploiting Student Workers!"

A tattooed man toting a motorcycle helmet approaches. He eyes the selection on the corkboard leaning against Buss's leg. "Wobblies? Cool," he says. He pays her for several pins, offers a variation on "glad to know you guys are still around," and shakes her hand.

The day is hot. Buss is standing in the sun. She shifts feet. It's important to sell buttons, she says. "They're popular. They bring in money." Bumper stickers, too. One says, "Because capitalism cannot be reformed."

Buss heads a movement based on ideals that, ironically, hinder it from gaining any real power.

The IWW is a pure democracy, controlled by its rank and file without a traditional leadership structure. Dues start at just $5 a month, so it's perpetually cash-poor.

VARIES BY MONTH

Members, tasked with literally organizing the entire world, are difficult to corral. Most are independent thinkers who lean toward the cantankerous. They are socialists, atheists, intellectuals, dreamers. Some have multiple piercings and tattoos; others, gray ponytails.

Even determining just how many Wobblies there are is tricky. "It varies by month, when people pay their dues," Buss says. There is no demographic information on the thousand or so members.

Wobbly locals are active across the country, from Boston (Education Workers Industrial Union 620) to San Francisco (Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union 510). There also are branches in Canada (Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton, Toronto and Ottawa), England, Australia, South Africa – "traditional Wobbly strongholds," as Buss says.

Tradition is what lures, and inspires, most Wobblies.

"I believe in unionism, that all labour unions must come together," says Miriam Fried of Philadelphia, the employee fired after the 1996 organizing drive at Borders. "The Wobblies are the most dedicated union around. I believe workers should make their own decisions. In the IWW, it's direct democracy, from the bottom up."

Sharon Vance, another Philadelphia Wobbly, says the IWW has "the big advantages without the big disadvantages of other unions."

That includes representing workers usually overlooked. "Even if it's a workplace with just two people and one boss, we're there to organize," she says.

Melvyn Dubofsky is an expert on the IWW. He's a history professor at Binghamton University-State University of New York and author of the definitive We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World, being reissued this November.

"The IWW reached their real peak during World War I," Dubofsky says. "So, actually, they've survived as a minuscule force for more than 80 years."

Along the way, the passionate Wobblies have become part of the cultural texture of America, he says. They appear as characters in Dashiel Hammett's Red Harvest, in John Dos Passos's USA Trilogy, in From Here to Eternity by James Jones.

Not to mention the enduring myth of larger-than-life Wobbly martyr Joe Hill, executed by a Utah firing squad for a murder that many still insist he didn't commit.

As the song goes:

And standing there as big as life,
And smiling with his eyes,
Joe says, "What they forgot to kill
Went on to organize,
Went on to organize.

What union bosses "forgot to kill" was the Wobbly dream of one union for all, regardless of race, nationality, gender, income or occupation.

"Different people and different generations find parts of that dream that appeals to them," Dubofsky says.

And that is what keeps the movement going. Just barely.

REACH YOUNGER WORKERS

But Buss is a pragmatist. When she took over, the IWW had an $8,000 deficit; now it's solvent. She aims to be able to accept a small salary so she can drop her part-time typesetting job. She wants to reach out to younger retail workers and workers toiling too many hours without overtime. She hopes to circulate more literature, increase the Wobbly Web presence, organize job actions, build cash reserves and, of course, sign up more members.

And she has one more goal:

After his cremation, Joe Hill's ashes were divided and sent to IWW delegates to be scattered around the world. A small pillbox of his remains, after taking a circuitous route, finally ended up back at the headquarters of the IWW, the union Hill helped to make famous.

"I'd like to get an urn, but we can't afford it," Buss says. "We'll have to raise some money."